

Influence of Social Media Based Brand Communities on Brand Trust

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Abstract

The advantages of social media as a highly efficient communication and distribution channel is motivating brand managers to participate in social media they try to bring together different or likeminded people in virtual brand communities. A brand community based on social media provides benefits to its members, to facilitate information sharing and to enhance customers' bonds to each other; it cements the customers' relationships with the brand, the product, the company and other customers (Laroche, Habibi and Richard, 2013). These enhanced relationships result in enhanced brand loyalty, and brand trust as an antecedent of loyalty has a key role in this process. Our findings explain that social media based brand communities have positive effects on the customer/product relationship; the customer/brand relationship; the customer/company relationship; and the customer/other customer's relationships and also all these relationships have a positive effect on brand trust.

Keywords: Social Media Based Brand Communities, Brand Trust, Social Media

1. Introduction

The issue of branding in social media is a research area for both businesses and academicians. On average, consumers devote almost one third of their time to consumption of online social media (Lang, 2010). Due to the popularity and ability of virtual communities to connect different likeminded people and businesses (Hagel and Armstrong, 1997; Wellman and Gulia, 1999), is encouraging businesses to be present in social media and to take advantage of the benefits (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010).

A brand community based on social media provides benefits to its members, to facilitate information sharing and to enhance customers' bonds to each other, it cements the customers' relationships with the brand, the product, the company and other customers (Laroche, Habibi and Richard, 2013). These enhanced relationships result in enhanced brand loyalty, and brand trust as an antecedent of loyalty has a key role in this process. Our findings acts to explain how social media could be a platform for brands to achieve positive relationships between customer/product, customer/brand, customer/company and customer/other customers and how brand trust has a direct effect on all the relationships among them.

2. Social Media based brand community

With the advancement of technology, the previously geographically bounded concept of brand communities is now transcending geography (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). Regarding the motivations for joining social media and brand communities for both people and brand managers, the concepts of social media and brand communities have become closer to each other. The intersection of brand communities and social media leads to a concept that we call social media based brand community. As Rheingold (1991) stated people use the new technology to do what they always did, so people use these new communities for the same purposes. A social media based brand community is composed of two concepts; social media and brand community (Laroche, Habibi and Richard, 2013). According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) social media is "a group of internet based applications that builds on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and it allows the creation and exchange of user-generated content (UGC). This definition simply explains that people do not consume the content passively but it is produced, shared and consumed by users actively generating content (UGC) (Laroche, Habibi and Richard, 2013). There are many researches focusing on the importance of UGC in different contexts. There are many different platforms for social media such as social networking, text messaging, photo sharing, wikis, weblogs, and discussion forums (Harris, 2009); however, it is mostly coined with such popular Internet based applications as YouTube, Wikipedia, Facebook, Twitter, and Second Life.

Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) define brand community as a "specialized, non-geographically bound community, and based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand. Like every other community, a brand community is made up of its entities including its members, their relationships and the sharing of essential resources either emotional or material. People have their own incentives to join. One essential psychological need is to feel socially connected. Desire for social interaction is stated as one of the motivations of consumers to engage in content generation activities in online environments (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, and Gremler, 2004). Joining social media and connecting with people fulfills a need for belonging (Sarason, 1974).

Companies start to recognize the significance of virtual communities and have actively utilized them for brand marketing activities as a means to maintaining close relationships with consumers (Palmer and Koenig -

Lewis, 2009). As a result of competitive structure of markets, social media has emerged as a new marketing environment for the firms recently. In order to gain competitive advantage and find cost effective solutions to reach customers, marketers have become more interested in learning about, organizing and facilitating online brand communities (Muniz and O'Guinn's, 2001). These communities are viewed as contributors to the brands' larger social construction, playing a vital role in the brands ultimate legacy. With different aspects customers get in relationship with a brand community influence their intentions and behaviors (Algesheimer, Dholakia, and Herrmann, 2005). Virtual brand communities play variety of roles for the members, such as providing easy access to information exchange and community participation unrestricted by time or space, as well as acquisition of useful information (Palmer and Koenig - Lewis, 2009). Other benefits of brand communities are facilitating information sharing, cementing the history and the culture of a brand, providing assistance to consumers, and positively influencing brand trust and loyalty (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001).

Shopping, researching, entertainment and making money are some other purposes of contributing in social media (Zhou, Zhang, Chenting, and Zhou, 2011). In contrast with researchers who claim that the lack of proximity and physical co-presence inherent in social media environments results in weak ties (Constant, Sproull and Kiesler, 1996; Granovetter, 1973), others showed that these ties could bring people together and encourage members to have deep levels of engagement in society (Tardini and Cantoni, 2005; Wellman, 1997). People also join brand communities to fulfill their need to be identified with groups or symbols they wish to associate with, or that are desirable to them (Schembri, Merrilees, and Kristiansen, 2010).

There is agreement among brand researchers that one of the main consequence of building and enhancing brand communities and consumer experience within the context of brand community is to make customers loyal to the brand (McAlexander and Schouten, 1998; McAlexander et al., 2002; Muniz and O'Guinn 2001; Schau et al., 2009; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Zhou et al., 2011b). McAlexander et al. (2002) stated that the cumulative effects of enhanced relationships in the customer centric model eventually result in customer loyalty; however, despite this and other qualitative evidence, it is still not clear how the process of increasing brand loyalty in brand communities looks like.

3. Customer centric model of brand community and social media

The first models of brand community were comprised a triad of customer–customer–brand (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001); however, McAlexander et al. (2002) added other entities that are related to the concept of brand community, i.e., product and company and the model became more customer centric.

A social media based brand community includes entities such as brand, product, customer, company, and social media, which is the platform for that community to exist. McAlexander and his colleagues showed that events such as brand fests bring members and other elements of a community to a high-context interaction. During these interactions meaningful consumption experiences, useful information and other valuable resources are shared among members and marketers reciprocally, which results in strengthening ties among all elements of the customer centric model of brand community (McAlexander et al., 2002).

When a member logs on a social media platform and explores the brand page, comments, shares a photo or experience, interacts with marketers, asks questions about the brand or the product or answers comments, meet people, that member is participating in the community activities and the invisible community becomes visible. In these interactions resources are being exchanged, information and value are being shared among members, so that the ties could be cemented in such communities. Thus, to the degree in which they support information sharing and welfare of the members, and strengthen bonds among them, brand communities based on social media – like offline brand communities – cement entities of the customer centric model of brand community, i.e., relationships between customers and brand, product, company and other customers (Laroche, Habibi and Richard, 2013). Thus: **H1:** Social media based brand communities have positive effects on the: (a) customer/product relationship; (b) customer/brand relationship; (c) customer/company relationship; and (d) customer/other customers relationships.

4. Social media based brand communities and Brand trust

According to the loyalty and trust literatures, trust is one of the main antecedents of loyalty (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001; Chiu, Huang and Yen, 2010; Harris and Goode, 2004; Hong and Cho, 2011; Kim, Chung, and Lee, 2011; Zhou et al., 2011). Considering that online communities, as a social structure, have positive effects on trust (Ba, 2001; Walden, 2000), we argue that the enhanced relationships in the customer centric model of brand community should increase brand trust, which has a positive effect on brand loyalty, i.e., brand trust has a key role in translating the effects of brand community into brand loyalty.

Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) define brand trust as “the willingness of the average consumer to rely on the ability of the brand to perform its stated function.” When a situation presents uncertainty, information asymmetry or fear of opportunism, trust plays a crucial role in decreasing the uncertainty and the lack of information. It makes customers feel comfortable with their trusted brand (Chiu et al., 2010; Moorman, Zaltman, and Deshpande, 1992; Pavlou, Liang, and Xue, 2007).

There are at least two mechanisms through which enhanced relationships between customers and brand elements could increase brand trust. First, repeated interactions and long term relationships are counted as key in developing trust (Holmes, 1991). Enhanced relationships with customers and elements of brand community necessarily increase relationships and contacts between the brand and customers so that brand trust would be positively affected.

Furthermore, relationship enhancement happens concurrently with information sharing and dissemination between different elements of the brand, which decreases information asymmetry, reduces uncertainty and increases predictability of the brand (Ba, 2001; Lewicki and Bunker, 1995) which results in trust enhancement.

Brand communities operating on social media can enhance brand trust by improving customer relationship with the brand, other consumers, the company and the products. Our finding is consistent with other studies that found participation in social virtual communities positively influences brand trust and loyalty (Casaló, Flavián, and Guinalíu, 2010; Kardaras, Karakostas, and Papathanassiou, 2003). So we create hypothesis that:

H_{2a}: The customer/product relationship has a direct positive effect on brand trust.

H_{2b}: The customer/brand relationship has a direct positive effect on brand trust.

H_{2c}: The customer/company relationship has a direct positive effect on brand trust.

H_{2d}: Customer/other customer relationships have direct positive effects on brand.

In our study we tried to test this model for helping further researchers to give more insight on this issue. Our research aims to take the brand community in perspective to examine if there are some benefits for brands in social media context and to show how these benefits could be applied. With this aim, we developed a model of the process by which a brand community can affect brand loyalty. Both our model and hypotheses in the context of social media are supported and validated by brand community literature.

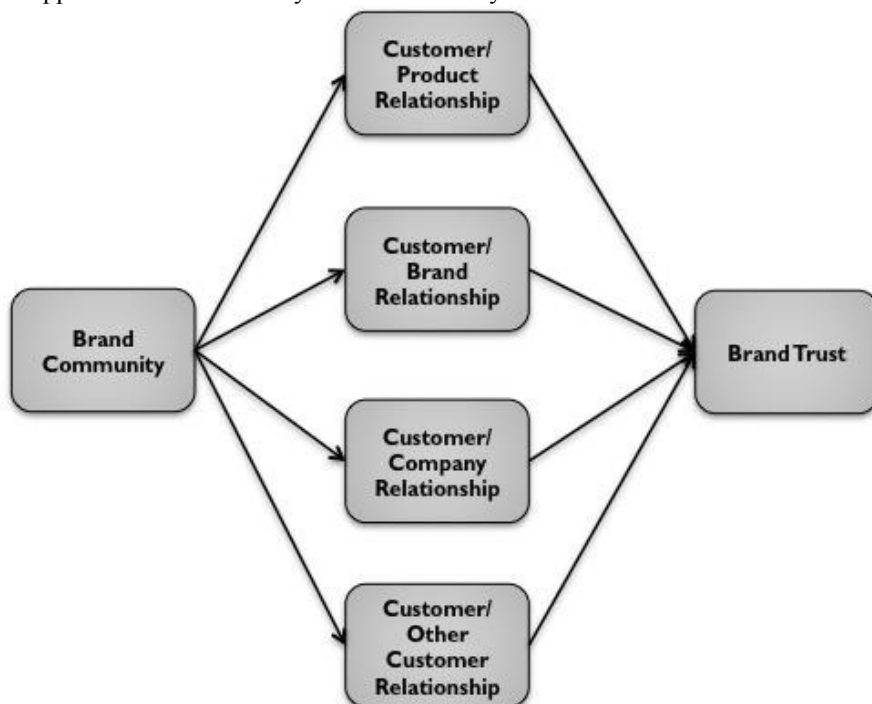


Figure 1. Conceptual model

6. Methodology

6.1. Measures

The measures of all the constructs in the model were based on Laroche, Habibi and Richard (2013). They were slightly modified the scales from the literature. Table 1 shows detailed measurement items of this study. All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1= (Strongly Agree) to 5=(Strongly Disagree).

Table 1. Measurement items

Construct	Item	Measurement	Reference
Brand Community	BrC1	The members of this community benefit from the community	Srinivasan, Anderson, and Ponnayolu (2002) Laroche, Habibi and Richard (2013)
	BrC2	The members share a common bond with other members of the community	
	BrC3	The members are strongly affiliated with other members	
Customer Relationship Entities			
Product	Prd1	I love the product of the brand	McAlexander et al. (2002)
	Prd2	I am proud of the product	
	Prd3	The product is one of my prized possessions	
	Prd4	The product is fun to use	
Brand	Brd1	I value the heritage of the brand	
	Brd2	If I were to replace the product, I would replace it with another product of the same brand	
	Brd3	My brand is of the highest quality	
Company	Com1	The company understands my needs	
	Com2	The company cares about my opinions	
Other Customer	Oc1	I have met wonderful people because of the community	
	Oc2	I have a feeling of kinship with the other owners	
	Oc3	I have an interest in the community because of the other owners of the brands	
Brand Trust	BrT1	My brand gives me everything that I expect out of the product	Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001)
	BrT2	I rely on my brand	
	BrT3	My brand never disappoints me	

6.2. Sampling and data collection

The subjects of this study are social media based brand communities in Turkey. Our target population consists of people who are members of any brand community in Facebook. Data for the study were collected from current Facebook users via electronic questionnaire. We asked participants to list the brand communities they are a member of and follow on Facebook.

Furthermore, we asked them to think the most interacted social media community while answering the questions. We collected 385 valid responses out of 500. Demographic characteristics of survey respondents were given in Table 2.

Table 2. Demographic characteristics of survey respondents (N=385)

Demographic profile		Frequency	Percent (%)
Gender	Female	212	55.1
	Male	173	44.9
Marital Status	Married	64	17.4
	Single	318	82.6
Education	High school or below	69	18.7
	University	287	74.5
	Graduate	26	6.8
Income	Up to 1000 TL	185	48.8
	1001-2000 TL	82	21.3
	2001-3000 TL	54	14.0
	3001-4000 TL	44	11.4
	More than 4001 TL	17	4.4
Community usage time	More than once a week	115	29.9
	Once a week	80	20.8
	More than ones a month	82	21.3
	Once a month	76	19.7
	More than a year	18	4.7
	Once a year	14	3.6

Most respondents were university educated (74.5%). Income levels were not very high cause they are generally University students.

7. Analysis and findings

To determine the dimensions of customer relationship with brand, product, customer, company an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) with Principle Component Factoring and Varimax Rotations was conducted (See Table 3). Twelve items converged into three factors with 77.40 % explained variance. Factors were named as “Customer relationship with product”, “Customer relationship with brand”, and “Customer relationship with other customer”. Reliabilities for factors were 0.814, 0.704, and 0.865 respectively.

To validate the factors proposed by EFA and investigate the dimension structure more deeply a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted using IBM SPSS AMOS 23.0 program (See Table 3 and Figure 2). All factor loadings were relatively high and significant, providing evidence for convergent validity (Bagozzi and Yi 1988).

Table 3. Exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses of components

Factors	EFA loadings	CFA loadings	<i>t</i>
Customer Relationship entities (KMO=0.796, $\chi^2_{\text{Bartlett test}}(28)=1353.065$, $p=0.00$)			
<i>Customer relationship with other customer</i> (VE=30.08, $\alpha=0.865$, CR=0.866, AVE=0.684)			
I have a feeling of kinship with the other owners	0.885	0.911	18.596
I have an interest in the community because of the other owners of the brands	0.874	0.787	<i>a</i>
I have met wonderful people because of the community	0.863	0.775	16.299
<i>Customer relationship with product</i> (VE=28.87, $\alpha=0.814$, CR=0.820, AVE=0.603)			
The product is one of my prized possessions	0.836	0.816	14.832
The product is fun to use	0.827	0.737	<i>a</i>
I am proud of the product	0.790	0.774	14.288
<i>Customer relationship with brand</i> (VE=18.27, $\alpha=0.704$, CR=0.713, AVE=0.557)			
If I were to replace the product, I would replace it with another product of the same brand	0.909	0.641	10.796
My brand is of the highest quality	0.704	0.846	<i>a</i>
Brand Community (KMO=0.674, $\chi^2_{\text{Bartlett test}}(23)=408.540$, $p=0.00$) (VE=72.03, $\alpha=0.804$, CR=0.805, AVE=0.586)			
The members share a common bond with other members of the community	0.892	0.821	12.735
The members are strongly affiliated with other members	0.870	0.751	<i>a</i>
The members of this community benefit from the community	0.779	0.578	11.313
Brand Trust (KMO=0.716, $\chi^2_{\text{Bartlett test}}(3)=446.683$, $p=0.00$) (VE=74.81, $\alpha=0.830$, CR=0.841, AVE=0.638)			
I rely on my brand	0.886	0.889	17.089***
My brand never disappoints me	0.862	0.804	<i>a</i>
My brand gives me everything that I expect out of the product	0.846	0.751	11.484***
$\chi^2(67, N=385)=155.739$, $p=.00$; AGFI=0.916 NFI=0.944, CFI=0.967, GFI=0.947, TLI=0.955 RMSEA=0.059 α = Cronbach's Reliability; VE= Variance Explained; CR= Construct Reliability; AVE=Average variance extracted <i>a</i> =scale item fixed to 1 * $p=.05$, ** $p=.01$, *** $p=.001$			

The various fit indices for the CFA suggested good fit to the data ($\chi^2(67, N=385)=155.739$, $p=0.00$, Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index (AGFI)=0.916, Comparative Fit Index (CFI)=0.967, Normed Fit Index

(NFI)=0.944, Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI)=0.955, Root Mean Square Error Approximation (RMSEA)=0.059). Construct reliabilities of 0.865, 0.814, 0.704, 0.804, and 0.830 indicated high internal consistency of the dimensions (Hair et al. 2006; Netemeyer et al. 2003). Average variance extracted (AVE) values, which reflect the overall amount of variance accounted for by the latent constructs, were all above 0.50 threshold (Fornell and Larcker 1981). To assess the discriminant validity of the scales we first checked the Fornell and Larcker (1981) criterion where the discriminant validity is established when the AVE for the two constructs is greater than the squared correlation between the two constructs. Then we constrained parameter estimate for the two constructs to unity and compared with factor model where parameter is freely estimated (Anderson and Gerbing 1988).

Structural model

Since the objective of this study was to identify dimensions that increased Brand Trust, a structural model was tested. The result of the path analysis showed a good fit of the model ($\chi^2(70)=159.793$, $p=0.00$; AGFI=0.919, CFI=0.967, NFI=0.943, RFI=0.925, TLI=0.957, RMSEA=0.058).

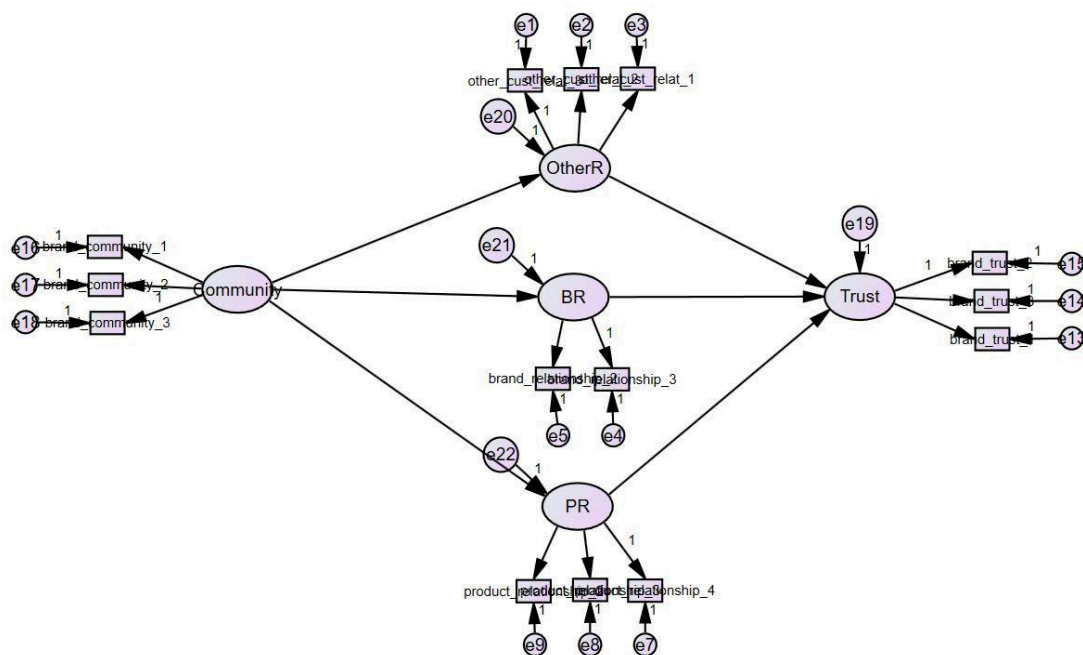


Figure 2. Graphical representation of path model

As a result of the path analysis it was found Brand Trust was explained by Customer relationship with product, Customer relationship with other customer, Customer relationship with brand and Brand Community. Customer company relationship was not significantly correlated neither with brand community nor brand trust. Customer relationship with product has a strong affect on Brand Trust ($\beta=0.727$, p value = 0.00). Customer relationship with brand has an affect on Brand Trust ($\beta=0.300$, p value = 0.00).

Table 4. Results of path models

Paths	β		t
Customer relationship with product \rightarrow Brand Trust	0.727		5.762 ***
Customer relationship with brand \rightarrow Brand Trust	0.300		3.073 ***
Customer relationship with other customer \rightarrow Brand Trust	-0.110	-0.110	-2.709
Brand community \rightarrow Customer relationship with product	0.269		7.109
Brand community \rightarrow Customer relationship with brand	0.234		4.745
Brand community \rightarrow Customer relationship with other customer	0.713		12.935
Brand community \rightarrow Brand Trust	0.187		2.829

($\chi^2(70)=159.793$, $p=0.00$; AGFI=0.919, CFI=0.967, NFI=0.943, RFI=0.925, TLI=0.957, RMSEA=0.058)

Note. $p < .05$, $p < .01$, $p < .001$

AGFI=Adjusted Goodness of Fit; NFI=Normed Fit Index; CFI=Comparative Fit Index;
TLI=Tucker Lewis Index; RMSEA=Root Mean Square Error Approximation

Customer relationship with other customer has a negative affect on Brand Trust ($\beta=-0.110$, p value = 0.007). Brand Community has an affect on Customer relationship with product ($\beta=0.269$, p value = 0.00). Brand

Community has an affect on Customer relationship with brand ($\beta=0.234$, p value = 0.00). Brand Community has a strong affect on Customer relationship with other ($\beta=0.713$, p value = 0.00). Brand Community has no significant relation ship with customer company relationship.

8. Conclusion

Our research basically shows the role of brand communities in enhancing customer relationships. A brand community based on social media acts to provide benefits to its members, to facilitate information sharing and to enhance customers' bonds to each other; it reinforces the customers' relationships with the brand, the product, the company and other customers. As the literature on brand trust and loyalty supports our findings, brand trust has a key role on defining these relationships between all parties. As an antecedent of brand loyalty, brand trust is a strong determinant element for building strong bonds between customer and brand. These enhanced relationships result in enhanced brand loyalty as a result. Our findings show that social media could be a platform for brands to build strong ties based on trust with their customers through online communities by engaging them to the brand building process.

According to the results we obtain, in the brand/company relationship, brand has more priority than the company for customers. Also, in customer/other customer relationship, when the relationship level decreases between them, the trust level increases. This result can be interpreted as the customers are joining brand communities to follow the brand only, not to communicate with other customers.

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